

Once to Every Man
By Elizabeth Cain

Black

When I awoke, Reena had gathered enough berries and roots to sustain us until morning, and she had found a clear spring from which she brought me fresh water in a rough bark cup she had fashioned with my knife. For two days, we stayed in that place, within the sound of the furious river that had tried to crush us. We hid within sight of the muddy ford that we had crossed but that our pursuers glared at in great frustration. We watched them pacing up and down, pointing to the narrow spots in the channel and arguing over what had happened and what to do.

I said to her once, "You could go out, and they would help you across, and you would be safe."

"What about you?" she asked.

I didn't answer right away. It seemed that the longer I stayed on the dark, unknowable side of the Rufiji, the more it satisfied me. I did not have to walk that thin line drawn for a black man in Dar es Salaam. I could be as wide and raging as the river behind us. I could be as godless and unpredictable as the surge of storm-water holed up in the hills, waiting to strike again. This new Dakimu appealed to me, and so I said, "I cannot go back now."

"I can't go back either," she said.

After a while, the men went away, but I knew they'd return, and so that night we took the most deeply-worn footpath toward the forest and left the broad, safe road. We must have been a strange sight to the eyes of those first friendly natives we met on our journey. Many of them were refugees from camps and villages higher up where the aggressors were active, and I know Reena feared coming face to face with a black from Huzuni.

I told villagers she was my wife. Some city blacks had married white women, so it was not questioned. We said we were searching for two white friends in a jeep, who must be reached before they entered the territory of the Vitani. The peaceful blacks, the Tulivu, were very willing to help, even though the men we sought were white. Living closer to British stations, they were familiar with jeeps and hurried white faces, tourists and soldiers, and they sympathized with anyone who might be threatened by the militants.

"We have seen them down on the road. Stay on this trail and you will parallel their course," the elders told us eagerly.

It was inevitable, however, that as we plunged deeper into the wooded hills, we learned less and less from the native people. They became more suspicious and more reticent, and Reena and I became more wary. At first, we used the visits in the villages to take advantage of the blacks' kind offer of food, hiding what we could in the baskets and bedrolls that had been supplied by the natives who trusted us. Soon I was forced to leave Reena a short distance from the villages and beg for food and gain information in an indirect manner. And then, I had to hide her as much as two or three miles out, when we began to meet Vitani runners at their outposts.

Those were terrible times. I never knew if Reena would be there when I returned, if she would be raped or cut to pieces. I was plagued by dreams of desire and death, and none of it was real. I looked at the white woman who was traveling beside me, trying to be brave, and sometimes I wanted to fade into the bush, just be gone from her side, her life. But it was because of her that we were alive and that we were closer to saving the life of Jim Stone.

We learned that Jim and Colonel Hahlos were four days ahead of us, that they had some kind of information or goods they were trading for safe passage. Reena brightened a little, and I felt glad for her. We rested more often now. Our feet were badly blistered, our shoes long worn through and discarded. Our backs tired easily, and our arms ached from breaking through tamarind branches and knotted vines. Sweat poured from our bodies, and the summer sun boiled it on our flesh. Then the rains would come and revive us again.

We trusted each other in the beginning. We shared secrets and doubts about the meaning of our lives, even doubts about God. Being Christian was not the only thing common to us, and being black and white not the only difference. But I thought a lot about the white Jim Stone down the trail and Reena's quest to be with him. She had never said she loved him. What hold did he have on her? She had been with me now longer than she had with him. She had saved my life. We had outwitted blacks and whites alike, crawling through dark tunnels of trees and brush, raw as newborn calves with scrapes and burns. We had swum together in clear pools untouched by the massive run-off in the flood channels. I was the murky river, she the crystal pool. We had eaten off the land, when the friendly villages became fewer and farther between. I was the dark berries, she the golden maize. But we fit somehow. We struggled and cried and felt defeated, black and white bound like a poem in metaphors of reconciliation and hope.

But between us always was the countenance of Jim Stone.

One time, I tried to kiss her. I would never have hurt her, but she lunged away, afraid.

"Please, Dak, that can't happen."

"Because I am black?"

"No! Never that, Dak. You are a beautiful man. And you are my friend. I want you as my friend," she said adamantly.

But it was too late for me. I wanted so much more. I didn't call it love then, because I had so hated the idea of a white woman. But I would soon wish, more than anything, to trade places with Jim Stone.

White

Late one evening, Dak caught an African hare in a crude net he had made. It was the first meat we had had since the early friendly villages. We built a small fire and roasted the flesh slowly. A half-dozen hyenas circled hopefully, barking their expressive and melodious yips. We tossed them bones as we devoured the rabbit.

I studied Dak's face in the flickering firelight. He was heart-breakingly beautiful. His features were chiseled like an Ethiopian's, but his skin was dark. Even sitting on the rough ground, he looked tall and elegant, like a prince. He said he didn't know who his parents were, that he came from an orphanage near Kilimanjaro and was sent to Huzuni for the missionaries to tame his wild streak. The Reimans had tamed his temperament, baptized him and given him their name. There was still a lost hue to his eyes, a direct gaze that was unsettling.

He was lean. I guess we both were at that time, subsisting on berries and corn left in some farmer's field and an occasional mango. We were as raw as the land, as hungry as the leopards we came across couched in a tree. They didn't bother us, but we gave them a wide berth. We had to abandon the trail a few times for elephants foraging for deeper grass. One day resting, we marveled at giraffes nibbling the tops of acacia trees and loping off at some perceived threat, although even lions rarely attacked those leggy beasts. It was a surreal and breathtaking world, but we were on a mission out of the animal's realm, and we mostly avoided their company.

Dakimu jumped up later that night at an unfamiliar noise. He pulled me into a thicket of strangler figs and held me tight. Out by our campfire a jackal nosed around in the smell of rabbit, and then, scenting us, scurried off. He released me quickly, and I said, "Dak, I'm not afraid of you."

"You should be," he said..

In the morning we moved on, not speaking, but not shying away when our shoulders touched or our hands met parting branches. It seemed that words would only ruin the shaky beginning of trust.

